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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Thirteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 336th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 7 October 1996, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mrs. BELEMBAOGO

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

GENERAL DISCUSSION ON THE CHILD AND THE MEDIA (agenda item 6) (continued)

1. The CHAIRPERSON invited Mrs. Kane, Mr. Arnaldo and Mrs. Peeters, in their capacity as rapporteurs of panels I, II and III, to take places at the Committee table.

2. She invited Mrs. Kane to summarize the morning's deliberations of panel I on child participation in the media.

3. Mrs. KANE (United Nations Children's Fund) said that children had been invited to participate in the discussions of panel I, which had taken as their point of departure the principle embodied in the Convention that children were free to express their opinion. It was indeed essential that children should be encouraged to play their due role in drawing up media programmes, and it would be artificial to separate the media from children's everyday life, in the family, at the school, in the community and in society at large.

4. The media were by no means identical all over the world. For instance, in Australia, few children had access to the media and the information they received originated from other sources. In contrast, in Manhattan, most children had access to cable television. The panel's first conclusion was that more in-depth study should be undertaken regarding the influence of the media on children. For instance, no scientific evidence existed that violence on television was harmful to children. The media should be assisted in increasing the participation of children, who required links between themselves and society in the broad sense, including their families, institutions dealing with children, paediatricians, schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or United Nations agencies. Also, new technologies, such as the Internet, should be better used in order to make it possible for children to express themselves through that medium. It was up to the authorities and the private sector to take action to achieve that end.

5. The media could also play a useful role in children's education. Much remained to be done, in that context, to change the role of the child from passive consumer to media producer.

6. Mr. ARNALDO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), reporting on the work of Panel II on protection of the child against harmful influences through the media, said that most of the Panel's conclusions centred on children, inter alia, that States should be encouraged to ensure more effective application of articles 17 (a) and 29 of the Convention; more effectively to protect children against the harmful influence of certain media which disseminated pornographic images or paedophile acts; to ensure also that all aspects of the real world, both positive and negative, were reflected in the media, while banning publicizing of extreme situations such as child abuse; to protect and preserve cultural and linguistic diversity in the interests of safeguarding democracy and preventing cultural stereotypes; and to draft guidelines which conformed with the spirit of the Convention for the media executives and for society in general. International organizations also had a vital role to play in that connection.

7. The Internet, in particular, could fulfil a useful function, provided software was developed whereby children's access to programmes that would be harmful for them could be curbed. The Panel had also suggested promoting and financing children's participation in designing media programmes; organizing national consultation campaigns among children and undertaking follow-up; presenting awards to media professionals who sought to inform children of their rights; promoting the organization of a national day for giving children access to the media; and holding an international conference in which children would participate with media executives in order to make both sides more aware of the responsibility of the media in children's development. UNESCO would be holding a meeting in Paris in 1997 with the group conducting research into the relationship between children and the media, and children would certainly be invited to attend.

8. Mrs. PEETERS (International Federation of Journalists), reporting on the work of Panel III on respect for the integrity of the child in media reporting, said that discussions had centred on the various principles embodied in the Convention, particularly regarding freedom of expression and the right to privacy. In view of the essential role played by the media in defending and promoting human rights, professionals in the sector should exercise vigilance to safeguard the integrity of children and adolescents. The Panel's discussions had focused to a large extent on television, and the means whereby the Convention could be promoted in cooperation with media professionals. Guidelines should be drawn up to enable journalists to conform more closely with the provisions of the Convention. It had been emphasized that a balance had to be struck between protecting children, and respecting the public's right to information. In that connection, the Panel had noted that the High Commissioner for Refugees preferred not to allow journalists to interview refugee children who had been subjected to violence. However, it might be useful to allow the voice of those children to be heard in order to make the public aware of their plight. It might also prove effective to recreate acts of violence inflicted on children. That had occurred in Cambodia where girls, who had been sold into prostitution and had subsequently escaped, had later played themselves in media coverage in order to inform the public of the problem. The Panel had gone on to discuss stereotypes that were perpetuated in the media, including that of violent children, which gave the impression that the problem was widespread, and that of adolescents of foreign descent, which had the effect of justifying policies designed to check immigration. However, one of the Panel's conclusions was that general principles in that sphere could not readily be formulated, and that a case-by-case approach should be adopted.

9. The CHAIRPERSON invited the participants to give their views on the points raised.

10. Mrs. NOGUCHI (International Labour Organization) drew attention to the situation of children participating in advertising and televized fiction, which she considered came under article 32 of the Convention. Such children were really forced to work, since production of an advertisement of a few seconds could require long hours of filming which might be very hard on young children. On the other hand, the media were useful in making the public aware

of a number of issues relating to child labour. However, it should not be forgotten that, in the media, financial interests were frequently the prime consideration.

11. The CHAIRPERSON drew attention to the fact that the Committee regularly urged Governments to ensure application of ILO Convention No. 138 on minimum age of admission to employment. She felt that children's participation in making advertisements or televized fiction was a case of use of children, rather than child labour. She did, however, agree that greater consideration should be given to a number of the principles embodied in the Convention.

12. Mrs. SANTOS PAIS said that the Committee had previously touched on that issue when examining the reports of several of the States parties to the Convention. She emphasized that families were frequently more concerned with their own interests than with those of the child and that, on occasion, national legislation allowed exceptions which could prove harmful to children. Clearly, featuring children in advertising and televized fiction was contrary to the principle of the best interests of the child, as embodied in the Convention.

13. Ms. JACOMY (International Catholic Child Bureau) reported on the conclusions of a study carried out by the Catholic University of Louvain on child models in advertising. The younger the children, the more inclined they were to perceive the directions from adults as coercion, despite a degree of freedom of interpretation. Frequent photo sessions meant that their school attendance declined and they stopped participating in leisure activities other than modelling, which could cause children gradually to lose touch with the concerns of their age group and, by extension, to become excluded from their own generation. Children needed to be prepared by their parents, and to engage in real dialogue with them because, should they disappoint their parents, the long-term repercussions on their personality would be considerable. Frequently, parents refused to discuss the financial aspect, although children from the age of four questioned on the subject said that they were aware that they were paid. Children initially considered the activity of child model to be amusing and fun, but rapidly came to describe it as trying, tiring and stressful. It ceased to be a leisure activity or game, and became a job. It was her view that the conclusions of the study, and those of the general debate organized by the Committee, should be circulated as widely as possible among media professionals.

14. Mrs. KANE (United Nations Children's Fund) said that she herself had been a child model between the ages of 4 and 18, and that she had subsequently produced advertising for children. She felt that generalizations should not be made regarding the harmful effects of children's "work" in advertising. Everything ran smoothly provided that children received sufficient support and that strict labour directives were applied. As an advertising producer, she had always been careful not to exploit children and not to give them the impression that they were being exploited. A way should be found whereby children could "work" in television and in the media, so that they could communicate their experience to other children.

15. Mrs. MACHID (International Baha'i Community) emphasized the media's paramount role in children's education. Although new information technologies

constituted an unprecedented tool for creation and knowledge and for expanding horizons, they could also have harmful effects on society, of which children were the most direct victims. Generally speaking, children did not use the media for their personal development or to increase their individual knowledge, while numerous programmes existed for children which combined violence, sex and crime, which had been shown by psychologists to have harmful effects on the social and intellectual development of children. Increasingly, heroes with questionable qualities were offered to children as models, while female stereotypes had a particularly negative psychological impact on girls. Programmes broadcast by the media were generally intended to amuse, but did not allow children actively to participate in seeking positive and non-violent solutions to the issues raised. Therefore, the media should administer the scheduling and content of programmes for children and adults in a more responsible manner.

16. The reports submitted by States parties showed that insufficient emphasis was given to compliance with article 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Committee should urge Governments to support production of educational programmes for parents and children, and encourage them to classify children's programmes on the basis of their content. Finally, it was important that the Committee should continue to examine child protection directives applied by individual States parties.

17. Mrs. LEAL GUZMAN (Mexican Civil Association "Comunicadores para la democracia") stated that children participated in sexual acts in cabaret performances in Mexico, and that the authorities were unable to intervene on account of the amparo procedure which allowed night-club owners to pursue their activities with complete impunity. She requested the collaboration of the Committee, and the support of the international community, in combating the phenomenon.

18. Mr. WILLIAMS stressed that children should be encouraged to participate in programmes offered by the media, and that international cooperation should be brought to bear in protecting minors, particularly in response to the development of the Internet.

19. Mrs. MIRBAHA pointed out that, while the media played a positive role in combating injustices and violence against children, they also had a harmful effect by advocating violence, rebellion and consumerism. Violence could well cause children to become indifferent to human suffering, and consumerism could generate anti-social patterns of behaviour. Consequently, programme makers should consult psychologists, educators and researchers. She suggested a number of ways in which directors of audio-visual programmes in general could be made more responsible.

20. Mrs. BISSLAND (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) drew attention to the fact that frequently the media intervened in favour of children in situations of emergency or conflict, sometimes with decisive effect. For instance, the media facilitated the mobilization and organization of assistance for children and, in some cases, the international adoption of children. They also made a positive contribution by publicizing human rights violations committed in some countries, and by bringing pressure to bear on the Governments involved to take action. In other cases, by

drawing the attention of the international community to the situation in a given country, they prompted the Governments involved to improve general security, as well as the security of refugees, particularly children.

21. The CHAIRPERSON added that the media had on occasion contributed to bringing about positive changes of a social and political nature, and to mobilizing international opinion on specific situations, in addition to facilitating a number of international solidarity operations.

22. Mrs. LANSDOWN (Children's Rights Office - United Kingdom) considered that the media did not deliberately refuse to involve children in their activities, but that they merely reflected the general attitude of society towards the child. Consequently, since children had neither the status of citizen nor the rights deriving from that status, even in countries which had ratified the Convention, they were not involved in any decision-making processes that were of interest to the media, and their views were not given due consideration by society as a whole.

23. Consequently, she felt that a first step in encouraging the media to give greater attention to children's opinions would be to enhance their practical participation in the administration of all the sectors of social life in which they were involved, including the family and school, within communities and local associations, and in collaboration with NGOs. Children would thereby be better placed to attract the attention of the media and to deal with them. It was a matter therefore of developing dialogue with children, and of establishing democratic relationships with them in all spheres of social life.

24. Mr. KOLOSOV thought that it was time, on the basis of a serious multidisciplinary study, to consider the possibility of offering children television programmes that could compete with broadcasts containing extensive violence or other scenes that were harmful to their development. Such a strategy would certainly be more effective than censorship mechanisms. NGOs existed which might take responsibility for such a study, the conclusions and recommendations of which could then be passed on to the media.

25. Mrs. ROSEN expressed the opinion that television broadcasts of all types were not the sole source of harmful influences to which children were exposed, and that advertising also exposed viewers to extremely negative concepts. An experiment conducted in the United States had shown that children who had learned to make their own programmes outside the commercial channels had displayed little interest in scenes of violence. Responsible adults should therefore make it clear to advertising agencies that they should cease producing advertisements for children which portrayed sexist, racist or violent behaviour.

26. The interactive media, such as Internet or CD ROMs, did not depend on advertising and were therefore more difficult to control. They could be used as a source of knowledge, although the persons responsible for children's education should ensure that such material did not offer behavioural models that were harmful to children's development.

27. Mrs. PEETERS (International Federation of Journalists) said that it had not been definitively proved that violence on the screen automatically affected children's development. It was, however, known that exposure to scenes of violence in the family or social environment was definitely detrimental to their development. Rather than condemning the media on the basis of hasty generalizations, it might be better to seek inspiration in concrete initiatives that had already been taken in a number of countries to combat violence in general.

28. Mrs. KOREN drew an analogy between television programmes and nutrition. Given that the health of human beings was conditioned by the quality of their diet, it was obvious that everybody, children and adults alike, should receive healthy "spiritual" nourishment, which implied restrictions on the exercise of freedom of expression, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in that the exercise of that liberty was accompanied by responsibilities. Consequently, the Committee should maintain dialogue not only with States parties, but also with the media.

29. Mrs. JOURDAN (International League of Women for Peace and Freedom) expressed concern over the fact that some programmes caused children to lose their sense of reality, which was detrimental to their harmonious development as human beings. Frequently, television programmes failed to respect the emotional rhythm of children, who were thus unable to identify with the characters in programmes in a way that contributed to their satisfactory development.

30. Mrs. SANTOS PAIS said that there had been numerous examples of the positive role that the media could play in the context of education and recreational activities, as well as in emergency situations. She suggested that children should have a say in the image that the media gave of them, and as recipients of broadcasts and publications by the media. She stressed, however, that it would be unrealistic to believe that children could be protected against all possible dangers from every source. Instead, efforts should be made to render children capable of making the necessary choices in an independent manner and, thereby, of exercising the right to information embodied in the Convention.

31. Mrs. PENROSE (Save the Children - UK) associated herself with Mrs. Lansdown's views regarding society's influence on children. She considered that the main point was to give children the practical means of participating in taking decisions that affected them and that, more particularly, children in difficult situations which were not necessarily of interest to the media should have other means of attracting the attention of public opinion and of the authorities, for instance, through NGOs.

32. Mrs. McNEILL agreed with Mrs. Penrose and said that there were different ways in which children could make their views known in the context of the media, including involvement with press and audiovisual associations such as Young Media Partners, Children's Express and Child's Net, which were professional networks that allowed children to have their say, using the media, in Great Britain and in the United States.

33. Mrs. KANE (United Nations Children's Fund) said that the media might be persuaded to broadcast programmes and publish articles portraying the Convention in a positive light, provided that people were familiar with the functioning and application of the Convention. Therefore, people involved in the promotion of children, and children themselves, should learn to deal with the media and to use the instruments employed by the media.

34. Mrs. ROSEN said she was disappointed that the discussions were still somewhat theoretical. She hoped that in future the problems, potential and experiences described in connection with media activities would be illustrated by specific examples, backed up by video cassettes or CD ROMs.

35. Mrs. ESTRELLA-GUET agreed that there was no proof that exposure to scenes of violence through the media necessarily had a harmful influence on children. It would therefore be useful to gather all the studies which had already been carried out, but which were sometimes incomplete, and to conduct further surveys in different countries in order to gain an understanding of how children reacted to scenes of violence on the screen. The results might be enlightening for the discussions on some of the issues examined by the Committee regarding children's behaviour.

36. Mr. KOLOSOV considered that the problem lay in the quality of broadcasts and works disseminated. Through the ages, the great works of painting, literature or drama had thoroughly explored the themes of cruelty, violence or nakedness, but the general quality of those works precluded any imputation that they promoted violence or pornography. Therefore, in keeping with the conclusions of Panel II, the Committee might contribute to creating awards to render tribute to programmes, publications, films or documentaries of high quality which had made a positive contribution to the promotion and development of children. The prize-winners could be selected by a jury made up of representatives of the International Federation of Journalists, UNICEF, UNESCO, the Committee and children.

37. Mr. HONAUER, pointing out that discussions had centred primarily on measures to combat negative practices, suggested that support should also be offered for laudable initiatives designed to boost children's powers of discernment. If sufficient emphasis were given to positive actions, reprehensible forms of behaviour would automatically disappear.

The meeting was suspended at 5.10 p.m. and resumed at 5.25 p.m.

38. Mrs. GASTAUT (United Nations Information Service) said she was pleased to have played a part in organizing the general discussion. Two alternative approaches had been feasible - the organization of a media event or an attempt to lay the foundations for action. Events had proved the choice of the second option to have been correct, since the discussions had confirmed that the issue of the rights of the child and the media, involving the rights of the child to participation, which was one of the most innovative aspects of the Convention, was still uncharted territory. Discussions that had been organized recently on that question had demonstrated how difficult it was for existing attitudes to assimilate the concept. The United Nations therefore had a major role to play in mobilization and awareness-raising. She intended to inform the Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information of the

Committee's recommendations so that the Information Service could collaborate in implementing them. There were currently four possible spheres of action. The first involved intergovernmental bodies. The Information Service could, with UNESCO, submit the Committee's recommendations to national representatives belonging to the United Nations Information Committee. The second area was that of the United Nations system as a whole, and of its information services in particular. The latter should do more to encourage the international media to take a greater interest in the daily life and opinions of children, in order to offset the coverage given to violence in the national media. The third line of action lay in making young people aware of the issue. The World Youth Forum, which was to take place in Vienna from 25 to 29 November 1996, should provide the members of the Committee with an opportunity to enter into dialogue on that issue with young people from all over the world. Finally, the fourth line of action, and the most important, lay at the national level. The United Nations information centres, in collaboration with the national committees of UNICEF and other bodies, could submit the Committee's suggestions and recommendations for debate by all interested circles within individual countries. Finally, she re-stated the United Nations Information Service's commitment to work side by side with the Committee to further discussions on the child and the media.

39. Mrs. PEETERS (International Federation of Journalists) highlighted a number of points raised during the discussion. It should be borne in mind that the matter of the rights of the child and the media was closely tied in with the social context as a whole. Hence, the media could not guarantee full access to children in a society which did not give them a right of participation. Also, it should not be forgotten that very little was as yet known regarding the impact of the media on children, and that more information was needed. Finally, such a complex issue could not be resolved by generalizations.

40. She harked back to several suggestions made during the Panel discussions which were of particular interest to the International Federation of Journalists. For instance, dissemination by the United Nations of material that could be used in journalism schools' ethics courses would be desirable. Also, an open-ended debate should be promoted regarding the moral choices facing journalists required to report on acts of violence against children. United Nations institutions should, in general, seek to support all initiatives taken by journalists in promoting the question of the rights of the child. The Federation was prepared to work with UNICEF and with children themselves to include those issues in the training programmes it organized throughout the world. A number of positive initiatives already existed to promote children's access to the media, and further information should be collected. It would doubtless be appropriate to organize an international meeting on that subject, provided that the necessary funds were available.

41. Mr. HAMMARBERG summarized the main ideas expressed during the general discussion in the form of 12 recommendations. He emphasized that the majority of recommendations were of national scope, but added that it was up to international organizations to publicize all examples of positive measures that already existed. The first recommendation was for the establishment of a listing of actions to further children's participation in the media. The second related to dissemination of information on the UNICEF initiative

entitled "Voices of Youth". The third recommendation dealt with interesting initiatives taken in connection with libraries for children, which could serve as a point of access to the media. UNESCO would be publishing an article on the subject in its magazine. The fourth recommendation was intended to promote media teaching in schools and, again, UNESCO could undertake to draw up a file on the best examples of such courses. The fifth recommendation served to make it clear that programmes made for and by children could not be competitive without State support. The sixth related to the creation of a listing of the best measures for protecting children against the harmful influence of the media. That information could serve as a basis for discussion of ways to further enhance the effectiveness of such measures. The seventh recommendation concerned dissemination of the plan drawn up by the Norwegian Government in collaboration with the Norwegian media and NGOs, which laid down a global approach centred on education for parents and children to help them decode the language of the media. He would, moreover, urge the Norwegian Government to take the first steps in that direction. The eighth recommendation concerned dissemination of advice to Governments designed to promote implementation of article 17 (e), which was frequently misinterpreted. Such activities could be undertaken in the context of the network established by UNESCO with several universities. The ninth recommendation concerned the drafting of specific directives on the manner in which the issue of abused children was presented in the media. It went without saying that such activities should be conducted in cooperation with the International Federation of Journalists. The tenth recommendation was for the drafting of a manual for journalists on the rights of the child. Indeed, the Centre for Human Rights had an assistance project regarding the content of the training given in schools of journalism. The eleventh recommendation sought the establishment of watchdog groups, along the lines of associations already existing in a number of countries. He emphasized that the international community should support the initiative. In particular, a coordination centre could be established to provide liaison between the groups in the different countries. The twelfth and final recommendation dealt with the introduction of the concept of correspondents for children's rights. It was not so much a matter of appointing journalists responsible for covering such issues continuously, as of inviting interested professionals to become familiar with initiatives that had been implemented throughout the world.

42. He had not taken up the idea of a major international conference on the child and the media, for two reasons. Firstly, the time was not right. There had been a good deal of discussion within other bodies, and targeted action would be more effective. Moreover, UNICEF had already organized a regional conference on the subject in Manila, and might perhaps wish to repeat the event, taking into consideration the recommendations of the Committee. Neither had he taken up the idea of creating an award to encourage journalists to cover children's rights. That might be seen as a tribute exclusively for those who publicized the Committee's cause, which would not be desirable. None the less, the matter deserved further thought and alternative incentives might be considered.

43. On behalf of the Committee, he suggested that an international working group on the rights of the child and the media should be established, composed of representatives of the Committee, UNESCO, UNICEF, the United Nations Information Service and the International Federation of Journalists, together

with representatives of other interested bodies. The task of the working group would be to examine the Committee's 12 recommendations, together with the other suggestions put forward during the general discussion, and it would report its conclusions during the Committee's spring session. Meanwhile, the relevant institutions were invited to take all measures they considered useful with a view to initiating implementation of the Committee's recommendations.

44. The CHAIRPERSON thanked all those who had participated in the general discussion and added a thirteenth suggestion that, in the medium term, a general comment should .e drafted on article 17 of the Convention, so as to facilitate the interpretation and application of that article.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.